

READING 2

Caroline Goucher, Charles LeGuth, Linda Walton, *In the Balance: Themes in Global History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1999), selections from chapter 17, "The Tentacles of Empire: The New Imperialism and New Nationalism in Asia, Africa, and the Americas."

Abstract: This essay explores the later stages of imperialism from Africa to Asia and the Americas.

The New Imperialism in Africa

Expansion fueled by capitalist industrialism and nationalism brought previously unsubjected lands under European control during the nineteenth century. At its height the British Empire alone consisted of over a quarter of the world's land mass and people. By 1914 Europe together with its colonial possessions occupied more than 80 percent of the globe. The conquest of Africa provided perhaps the clearest example of what is sometimes called the "new imperialism," an era roughly beginning in Africa in the 1880s and continuing into the twentieth century.

European Imperialism and the Berlin Conference

Africa, which Europeans called the "dark continent" because its interior was still virtually unknown to them, was colonized by conquest from one end of the continent to the other. The British spread southward from Egypt, where they had established themselves by 1875 and assumed a protectorate (controlling authority) by 1882, while they moved northward from Cape Colony in South Africa, which they had held since 1815. A column of British-claimed territories that stretched up the entire east coast of Africa was interrupted by German acquisition of East African territory in 1885.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade had been central to capitalist development and growth in West and Central Africa. Even after the abolition of slavery by European powers beginning about 1807, African societies continued and, in some instances, even deepened their dependence on slave labor. The slave trade era was followed by the era of "legitimate commerce," a period between about 1800 and 1870 during which African-European economic enterprises were forced to find other products to replace illegal human cargoes. In almost all instances the products sold to international markets were agricultural or forest products grown or collected for export to Europe. They included timber, rubber, palm oil, minerals, and ivory. Even when slaves were no longer exported, slavery and other forms of coerced labor remained essential to the production and transport of commodities. The era has also been termed a period of informal empire, suggesting that the

economic relations characteristic of the subsequent formal empires of the colonial era were well underway by the end of the nineteenth century.

The Berlin Conference

At the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885, European powers and the United States met to protect their "spheres of influence" (areas of special economic and political interests) and to establish mechanisms for making new territorial claims. The scramble for African territory was underway. An earlier catalyst for the scramble for territories came from King Leopold II of Belgium (r. 1865-1909). Motivated by greed and ambition to expand the wealth and territory of his small European kingdom, Leopold undertook what he called a crusade to acquire the Congo Free State (later, Zaire). The relatively swift imposition of European colonial rule in Africa following the Berlin Conference also needs to be understood against the backdrop of several centuries of the Atlantic slave trade, the rise of an African merchant class, and the penetration of merchant capital prior to 1900. These forces undermined the earlier systems of authority on the continent and prevented African societies from dealing with the European presence in any unified way.

European Territorial Claims in Africa

The distribution of European-dominated territory on the West and Central African coast was more scattered than other regions, and European trade competition, especially between Britain, France, Germany, and Belgium was more fierce. Before the outbreak of World War I (see Chapter 18), the lower Niger valley had become Nigeria, a British protectorate, as had Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast, but German imperialist activity checked British interest in the coast above Cape Colony. A German protectorate, established over Southwest Africa in 1884, was a sharp blow to British designs. Despite such frustrations, Great Britain had staked out claims to a great share of African territory.

French territorial acquisitions in Africa were equally staggering. From about 1830, the French began to re-create the empire they had lost in 1763 (when they surrendered Canada and India to Britain) with a campaign to conquer Algeria. Using piracy as an excuse, the French began their African expansion with an expedition of troops to Algeria in 1830, leading to a lengthy and violent assault (termed a "pacification" by the French) that resulted in its mid-century integration as three departments of metropolitan France. France, in claiming lands and peoples previously unclaimed by Europeans, was setting the pattern for a general European imperialist race that resumed after 1870. The annexation of Algeria was an inaugural step toward realizing a French dominance of Africa north of the equator. The next step was the annexation of Tunisia (1881). In 1904 an agreement with

Great Britain provided English support for rounding out French holdings in northwest Africa by establishing a protectorate over Morocco (1912), despite German opposition.

In equatorial Africa the French established themselves on the Kongo, and in West Africa in Senegal. As early as 1885 these colonies were linked across the Sahara to French North African territories, thus consolidating the vast African territory north of the equator and west of Egypt and the Sudan. With French acquisition of the island of Madagascar in 1896, their African territories exceeded those of Great Britain, though the colonies most strategic to the French lay along the Mediterranean shore of North Africa, closest to France itself.

What the British and French left unclaimed in Africa was taken by the Germans, Italians, Belgians, Portuguese, and Spanish. Taken together, these holdings meant that only two areas of Africa remained unclaimed by Europeans by the time of the outbreak of World War I: Liberia, a territory that was partly settled by repatriated African and African-American slaves from the Americas and virtually a dependency, however unacknowledged and ignored, of the United States; and Ethiopia, which retained independence only by defeating the 1896 Italian effort at conquest. This comprehensive European hegemony over Africa, once completed, proved to be surprisingly short-lived, though no one would have supposed so before World War I.

The Economic Advantages

In some important ways the era of colonial rule was fundamentally different from what had preceded it. Before colonial rule Africans were independent, if not always equal, trading partners. After colonial rule, this African economy became a European-dominated economy. Under post-Berlin Conference colonial rule, African political economies controlled by colonial powers—such as Great Britain, France, or Germany—were rapidly establishing Western-based capitalism that would inevitably reduce the power and economic opportunity of the African participants. While production remained largely in African hands, Europeans controlled colonial credit and trade tariffs. Few Africans prospered during this era; colonial controls hampered the development of free enterprise, and European governments offset the high costs of extracting raw materials and transporting them to European-based manufacturing centers by providing price supports. European economic and political hegemony depended on the development of the colonial system. African colonies supported many European industries that otherwise could not have been profitable. For example, the textile industry of France depended on the cheap cotton supplied by French West African colonies to remain competitive with technologically more advanced manufacturing in Great Britain and the United States. The other side of the

colonial relationship was of course the development of markets in Africa. African markets continued to support the patterns of Western industrial growth as Africans became dependent consumers of European textiles, iron pots, agricultural implements, soap, and even foodstuffs.

Political Conquest

There was another way in which the industrial achievements of the colonizers wrought a hefty price from the colonized: political independence was lost as one territory after another was conquered. Although post-Berlin Conference colonial rule followed decades and even centuries of involvement, its imposition was swift. The use of military force as necessary everywhere to establish and maintain European control of African territories. The European tools of empire, from quinine (to treat malaria) to the steamboat, railway, and machine gun, all enabled the penetration and conquest to be complete. In some places, such as the Benin kingdom of Nigeria in 1897, Europeans forcibly removed the local rulers (the *obas* and his chiefs) from power and sent them into exile. Cultural treasures that expressed power and recorded the Benin kingdom's historically sanctioned legitimization were stolen and taken to Europe, where they were auctioned to offset the costs of the expedition. Accordingly, the Benin bronzes and ivories are found today in world museums, from Berlin to London and New York.

The Colonial System

The colonial systems differed in strategy and form under British, French, Belgian, German, and Portuguese rule. The British policies were termed "indirect rule," and they required British district officers to be supported by local chiefs and puppet administrators drawn from local circles. French rule was termed "direct rule" and utilized the French themselves as colonial officials in the field; under French assimilationist policy, Africans who adopted the culture (language, dress, and lifestyle) of French nationals were allowed to become French citizens. The repercussions of such distinctions had a lasting impact on the relations between the former colonial power and its colonized peoples.

The purpose of the colonial system, regardless of the type of rule, was exploitative, seeking to harness the resources of land and people for the benefit of the metropole (the European capitals). Profits from the unequal and often brutally enforced economic relations were returned to Europe while African markets were created to consume European manufactured goods. Colonial laws, imposed by force, invaded peoples' lives, from their rights to work and live in certain places; and to live freely to their rights to read or speak their own languages or practice their traditional religions.

Although many Europeans complained bitterly about the costs of the colonial enterprise (the British author Rudyard Kipling called this the "white man's burden"), some segments of European and other industrialized societies were enriched by their colonial ties. For example, some French industries were absolutely dependent on the cheap raw materials, labor, and consuming markets of their colonial partners. Large multinational concerns eventually emerged from the colonial enterprises, including Lever Brothers, Lloyds of London, and many other companies that began as commercial organizations during the slave trade and the subsequent era of legitimate commerce.